Article

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Worker Commitment and Labour Management Relations under Lean Production at CAMI

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Efforts by CAMI, a unionized Suzuki-General Motors auto plant in Ontario, to construct a workplace characterized by worker commitment and cooperative labour-management relations are examined. Why did these efforts fail? Why, of all the Japanese or joint-venture transplants in North America, was it at CAMI that industrial conflict occurred? Does the experience hold important implications for worker and union responses to lean production in other settings? The findings presented are the result of a longitudinal investigation conducted over a two year period by the CAW Research Group on CAMI. The researchers had an unusual degree of access to the shopfloor, and base many of their observations on data drawn from a randomly selected sample of workers.

Cooperative labour-management relations have become a hallmark of contemporary Japanese industrial relations and are often cited as a key factor underlying the remarkable performance of that country's economy, and especially that of the Japanese automobile companies. Cooperation is reflected by the low incidence of strikes, and the diligence of workers by data showing that the Japanese labour force logs substantially more hours of work per year than

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workers in other industrialized nations. The reasons for these seemingly cooperative labour-management relations are the subject of some debate.

On one side are those who view worker commitment and cooperation as voluntary, an attitude nurtured by the special character of Japanese organizational structures and management practices.[1] This corporate environment supposedly features employment guarantees, housing and welfare programs, worker participation, multiskilling, and the re-unification of the conceptualization and execution of work (Kenney and Florida 1988; Lincoln and Kalleberg 1990; Womack, Roos, and Jones 1990).

On the other side, the critics attribute Japan's peaceful industrial climate to an organizational milieu that has created compliance rather than voluntary cooperation among workers. Individualized wage payment systems enable management to reward cooperative workers and penalize uncooperative ones, including those who refuse overtime, or who do not get involved in Quality Control (QC) circles. More important, enterprise unionism leaves workers without an effective collective force to challenge management prerogatives and demands (Clarke 1990; Dohse, Jurgens and Malsch 1985; Glaberman 1983; Kamata 1982; Okayama 1987; Shimokawa 1987; Turnbull 1988).[2]

Despite weaker (or non-existent) employment guarantees than in Japan and the absence of individualized remuneration, Japanese auto transplants and joint ventures in North America have been notably strike free. While it is true that most transplants operate without unions, the aura of high trust that surrounds transplants has been reinforced by reports on the New United Motor Manufacturing (NUMMI) plant, a unionized joint venture of General Motors (GM) and Toyota in Fremont, California. NUMMI, whose production and

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1 Early explanations of the "Japanese miracle" emphasized the peculiarities of Japanese culture and personality (Vogel 1979). Current interpretations give little weight to culture, stressing instead the character of Japanese organizational, production and management structures.

2 Recent developments in the heartland of lean production indicate that labour-management ties are wearing thin. Workers and unions have come to recognize the price they have paid for working under this system, and they are raising questions about the human costs of their companies' successes. In what a writer in *Automotive News* described as a "landmark report," the Confederation of Japan Auto Workers Unions lamented declining worker morale and asked, "For whom is the company making progress?" The report complained about long hours of work, excessive overtime demands, workforce reductions, the use of temporary workers and inadequate wages. To achieve these goals (especially the reduction of yearly work hours from an average of 2,300 to 1,800) the Confederation recommended extended model change cycles and a reduced number of models and variations-parts for each model. Faced with these demands and an unprecedented decline in sales and profits, Japanese auto companies are restructuring their operations. Nissan (which announced in 1993 plans to close its massive Zama assembly plant) has built and Toyota plans to build new plants with amenities and a labour process that reportedly is less strenuous than in extant facilities. The automakers also are in the process of prolonging the production runs of some models, reducing variations in models, cutting back overtime and adding several paid holidays. See Maskery (1992).

management systems are patterned after Toyota, has been praised for turning a trouble-plagued car plant into a model of efficient production and conflict free labour-management relations (Adler 1993; Brown and Reich 1989; Shimada and MacDuffie 1987).

Florida and Kenney's (1991) research on transplants makes the more far reaching claim that with few modifications, the system of Japanese production management (JPM), along with enlightened personnel policies, has been successfully diffused to transplants, unionized and non-unionized alike.[3] The media, especially influential trade journals like *Automotive News*, have applauded the efficiency and consensual labour relations of Japanese companies and their North American offspring. Dissident views, like Parker and Slaughter's (1988) critical analysis of team concept, are sometimes noted, but JPM, or in the words of Womack, Roos, and Jones (1990), lean production (LP), is steadfastly portrayed not only as a worthwhile but a necessary model for restoring industrial competitiveness.

In light of these generally benign images of transplants, the five week strike in the Fall of 1992 at CAMI, a unionized Suzuki-GM auto assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, is of particular interest.[4] This action by members of Local 88 of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union assumed historic significance since it was the first time a transplant or joint venture in North America had experienced a work stoppage. The strike attracted considerable media interest, not only because it was undertaken in the midst of Canada's deepest recession since the 1930s, but also because it raised questions about an emergent form of workplace organization whose immunity to overt conflict had been taken for granted.

This paper examines CAMI's efforts to construct a workplace characterized by worker commitment and cooperative labour-management relations and offers an explanation of why these efforts failed. The discussion then focuses on the question of CAMI exceptionalism. Why, of all the North American transplants, was it at CAMI that we witnessed labour-management conflict? Is CAMI a deviant case?

THE CAW RESEARCH GROUP ON CAMI

The findings and arguments presented here are part of a broader project initiated by the Research Department of the CAW. The CAW Research Group on CAMI brought together two union research staff, two academics, and three

3 Womack, Roos, and Jones (1990) are uncharacteristically cautious about worker commitment in transplant operations, arguing that it is contingent on employment security.

4 CAMI opened in 1989 and is now operating two shifts with about 2,300 shopfloor workers, about 20 per cent of whom are women, and whose average age is under 30.

union committee persons[5] to monitor over time a production and management system with which the union had little direct experience but many concerns.

In contrast to previous studies, such as the those sponsored by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) based International Motor Vehicle Research Program (Womack, Roos, and Jones 1990), the research focused on the organization of work and social relations on the shopfloor. The Research Group explicitly set out to address a set of worker-relevant questions whose answers had been largely assumed in research undertaken by the MIT group. For example, what price, if any, do workers pay for whatever competitive advantages are enjoyed by firms practicing LP? And what is the role of an independent union under this emergent system of LP?

Access to the plant and the workforce during working hours was negotiated by the CAW national leadership with CAMI management.[6] The researchers spent one full week at the plant every five or six months over a two year period in 1990 and 1991. At each visit the researchers conducted 45 minute interviews with a randomly drawn sample of 100 workers. For various reasons (turnover, injuries, promotions to team leader, etc.), some of the original members of the worker sample had to be replaced. Consequently, in drawing comparisons across time, only the responses of persons who were interviewed in all four rounds were used, as well as the responses of those who were interviewed only in the final three rounds. The interview schedules consisted of fixed-choice and open-ended questions.

The researchers also conducted open-ended, taped interviews with team leaders, the skilled trades, union representatives, and managers from all levels of the organization. While the same workers were interviewed each time (with the exception of drop-outs and replacements), the other interviewees were not

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5 This project was partially funded by Labour Canada. The views expressed in this paper are those of the Research Group and not those of Labour Canada. In addition to the authors listed, the members of the CAW Research Group on CAMI are Steve Benedict (CAW Local 112), Alan McGough (CAW Local 27), Herman Rosenfeld (CAW Local 303) and Jeff Wareham (CAW Research Department). The two university-based members of the research group had planned on initiating their own study of CAMI, but on learning about the CAW research plans, accepted the union's invitation to join the research group. As in the case of previous work, this paper reflects the collaborative contribution of all members of the Research Group.

For a half-time report on the Research Group's findings see Robertson, Rinehart and Huxley (1992). For a more comprehensive summary of the final results, which were distributed to CAMI workers, see Robertson et al. (1993). While the present paper is written as an original contribution, and contains new material and observations based on the research, certain formulations may have appeared in work published elsewhere.

6 The only formal requirement demanded by CAMI management was that they had the right to comment on the results of the investigation, and that any such comments would form part of the final report. See "Comments by CAMI" in Robertson et al. (1993: 58-61).

always the same persons. All interviews were done on company premises and most on company time.

In addition, the research group carried out repeated observations of selected work stations on the shopfloor. Technology, job content, line speed, work loads, etc. were recorded, and researchers were able to talk to team leaders and workers on the job. Changes in the labour process were also tracked over the two year period. As far as can be determined, this is the first study of a Japanese or joint venture plant in North America to draw systematic information from a randomly selected sample of workers and to have had such unrestricted access to the shopfloor.

CONSTRUCTING CONSENT

The initial agreement between CAMI and Local 88 of the CAW was prefaced by the assurance that it was "negotiated and will be administered in the spirit of mutual trust and in support of CAMI's values." CAMI went to considerable lengths to construct a high trust workplace. The protracted recruitment process was highly selective (about 2,300 people were hired from some 43,000 applicants).[7] The orientation training, referred to as *Nagare*[8] training, given during the newly recruited workers' first week at the plant, is heavily loaded with ideological content. Workers are taught that their ideas will be valued, that they will have the chance to develop their abilities, and that they will receive fair and respectful treatment. They also learn about CAMI's values—empowerment, *kaizen* (continuous improvement of operations), open communications and team spirit. Each of these values is related to the goal of developing a loyal and diligent workforce.

CAMI is a team concept plant. At the most general level, team concept refers to a collaborative partnership between management and workers. In CAMI's view, everyone from the company president to the worker on the line is part of one big team, partners pulling together to beat the competition. This image is reinforced by the absence of time clocks, reserved parking spaces and executive cafeterias. All workers wear similar uniforms with first name labels above the pocket. There is no category of employees called workers. Hourly paid personnel who work on the shopfloor are known as production associates (PAs), team leaders or maintenance associates. All are members of the same bargaining unit.

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7 There is no evidence that CAMI tried to screen out workers with previous union experience. In round one, over one-half of the workers in our sample had union backgrounds.

8 A training manager explained that the term *Nagare* is borrowed from the lexicon of the Suzuki production system. The word in Japanese conveys the idea of movement that is both swift and smooth.

All workers are organized into teams under the coordination of team leaders. On an everyday basis teams are the medium through which workers' attitudes and activities are shaped. Each team has a space for meetings and breaks. Team members are encouraged to adopt team names, to do *taiso* (pre-shift calisthenics), to pass on their improvement (*kaizen*) ideas to team leaders and submit *teians* (suggestions) and to form QC circles that issue proposals for reducing costs. Ideally teams are repositories of CAMI culture, but even if workers are not committed to company values, peer pressure within the team can operate to boost attendance, job performance and *kaizen* activities.

Teams at CAMI have various production-related functions. Teams provide a vehicle for training and job rotation and absorb indirect duties (housekeeping, some material handling, minor maintenance and inspection) performed in traditional auto plants by special categories of workers. Nevertheless, it is socio-cultural rather than technical considerations—the objective of manufacturing compliance and consent—that lie behind the corporate construction of work teams. Work at CAMI is not, for the most part, a team-based production system but a system of teams superimposed on a traditional assembly line operation in which output is based on the individual efforts of each worker carrying out standardized jobs. The team can support and reinforce individual effort, but for most jobs at CAMI the individual has not been supplanted by the team as the operative unit of production. Teams at CAMI are more an expression of social engineering than of a fundamentally new system of production.

THE ELUSIVENESS OF CONSENT: SURVEY RESPONSES

How successful has CAMI been in selecting and developing a workforce dedicated to the company and its values? Survey respondents were asked a series of questions to ascertain their evaluation of and commitment to policies and practices associated with key company values that purportedly distinguish CAMI from traditional workplaces and establish the framework for cooperative labour-management relations.

Open-ended responses revealed that the broad definition of team concept — CAMI as one big team—had little meaning to most workers on the shop-floor. Team concept meant neither equality of all employees nor partnership with management, and the CAMI value of team spirit increasingly was regarded as little more than an empty slogan. For most workers team concept had a concrete referent that signified where, and with whom, they worked day after day. That workers did not subscribe to the company's idea of partnership was indicated by their distrust of management. When asked, "Do you think management at CAMI would 'put one over' on workers if they had the

chance,'' 80 per cent of respondents in round one and 98 per cent in the final round answered ''yes.'' And when the sample initially was asked if a union was needed at CAMI, ''because no matter how cooperative the relationship there will always be differences between workers and management,'' 57 per cent ''strongly agreed'' and 41 per cent ''agreed.'' With each round a growing proportion of workers ''strongly agreed'' that a union was needed, and by round two and thereafter no one disagreed about the need for a union. In the final round 81 per cent ''strongly agreed'' and 19 per cent ''agreed'' that a union was necessary.

Figures 1 through 4 show the changes in worker attitudes to CAMI and its values. These figures reveal two salient points. First, a substantial minority, and in some cases a majority, of respondents exhibited scepticism of CAMI's values and practices. Second, with each subsequent interview this scepticism was expressed by a growing proportion of workers. By the final round at the end of 1991, nearly 90 per cent of the sample viewed CAMI as no different from other companies; over 90 per cent felt common cafeterias, uniforms and parking areas were a smokescreen that masked differences in power; almost three-quarters regarded CAMI as undemocratic; and over 80 per cent viewed it as competitive and stressful.

To provide an overall picture of how successful CAMI has been in transmitting its philosophy and developing a loyal workforce, a commitment index was constructed based on respondents' answers to seven questions.[9] From these responses three categories of workers were distinguished. Those who scored high on the index believed in CAMI values and were dedicated to the company and its objectives. Respondents who scored in the middle range held

9 The seven questions were: 1) "If you find a way to do your job that is easier or faster than the specified way, what do you do? Keep it to yourself, share it with a few co-workers, tell the team leader or submit a suggestion." 2) "Some people say that when the team concept has been tried at other plants the teams work more for the good of the company than for the good of workers. Based on your experience at CAMI would you agree or disagree." 3) "Which of the following best characterizes the atmosphere at CAMI — democratic or undemocratic." 4) "Do you think everyone should participate in the suggestion program?." 5) "Which of the following statements comes closest to your feelings about CAMI? (a) CAMI is a special experiment designed to change the way people work in Canada. I'm enthusiastic and excited about it, or (b) There is really nothing special about working at CAMI, and in fact, all things considered, CAMI really isn't any different than other corporations." 6) "Do you think managers at CAMI would 'put one over' on workers if they had the chance?" 7) "Many observers have commented that managers at CAMI and other team concept plants have gotten rid of many of the things that made them seem superior to workers. They point out that managers no longer have separate parking areas, cafeterias and dress codes. Considering this issue, which of the following statements comes closest to your feelings about common cafeterias, dress codes and parking areas? (a) It's a good thing, it's starting to make managers and workers more equal. (b) It's nothing but a smokescreen. The reality is that management still has all the power."

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Respondents who Viewed CAMI as Special or no Different from other Companies

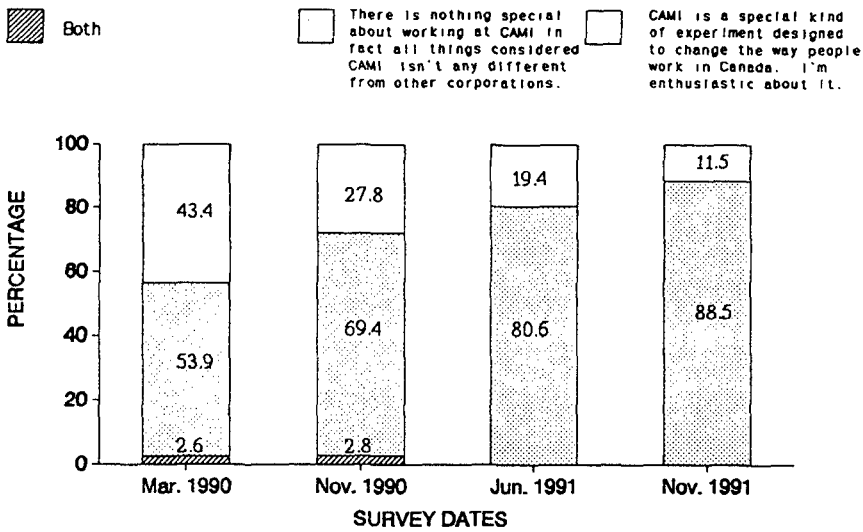


FIGURE 2

Percentage of Respondents who Viewed CAMI's Cafeteria, Dress Codes and Parking Areas as Either a Good Thing or a Smoke Screen

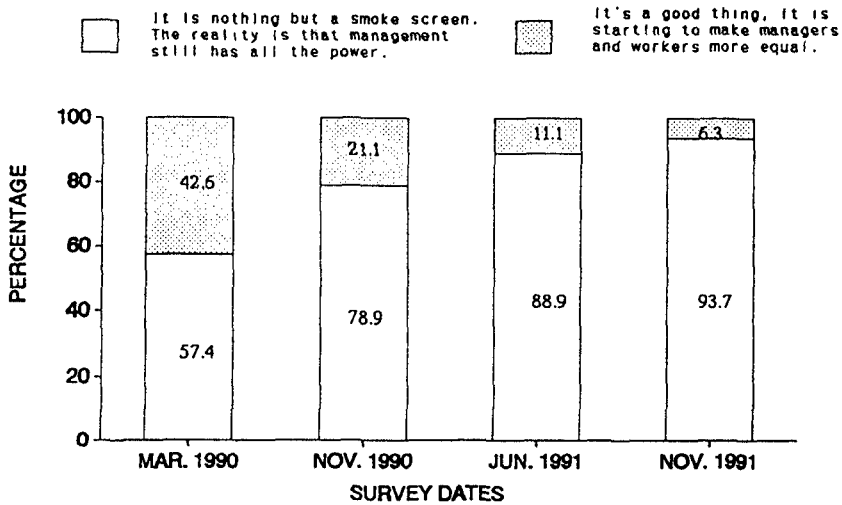


FIGURE 3

Percentage of Respondents who Viewed CAMI as Democratic or Undemocratic

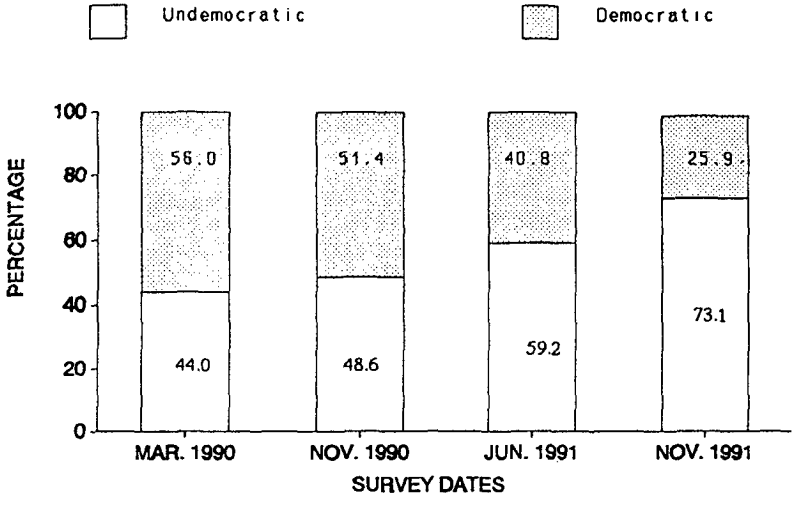
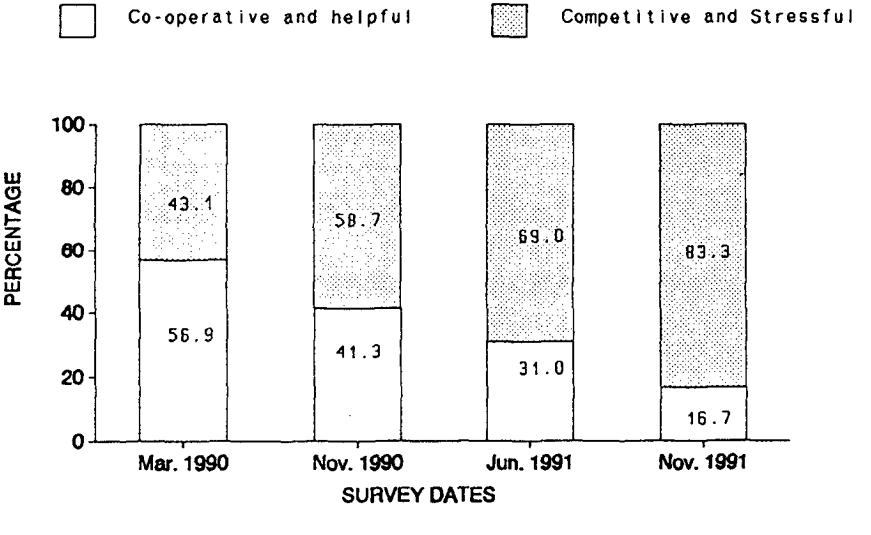


FIGURE 4

Percentage of Respondents who Viewed CAMI as Competitive and Stressful or Co-operative and Helpful

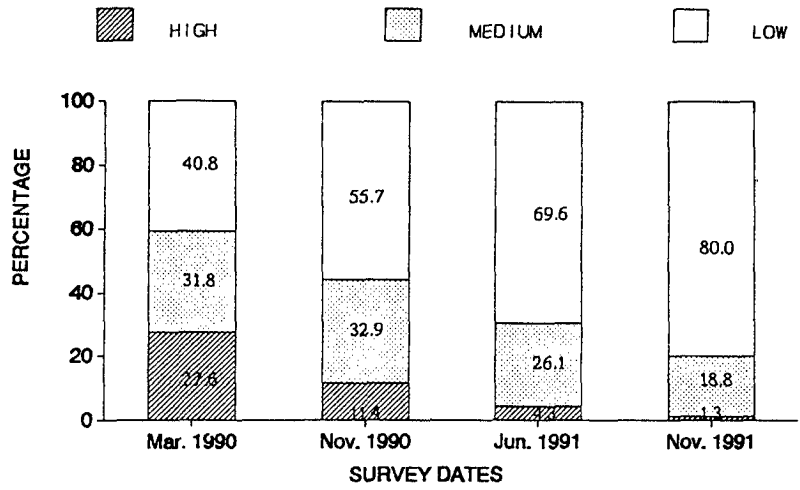


both positive and negative opinions of the company. Those who scored low on the index questions viewed CAMI as just another factory and indicated no particular attachment to the company and its values.

As Figure 5 indicates, the proportion of high and moderately committed respondents declined through each of the four interview periods. By the final round, 19 per cent fell into the middle category, while only one per cent indicated high commitment. From another viewpoint, the percentage of respondents who were uncommitted to CAMI steadily grew from 41 in round one, to 56 in round two, to 70 in round three and to 80 in the final round. Despite a highly selective recruitment process, the ideals taught in *Nagare* training and the company's emphasis on developing high trust relations and a participatory environment, workers' disenchantment with CAMI grew. This trend was dramatic, as the number of workers who indicated no commitment to CAMI virtually doubled over the two year research period.

FIGURE 5

Percentage of Respondents whose Answers to Seven Questions Indicated High, Medium and Low Committment to CAMI



EMPTY PROMISES

While CAMI was in the start-up mode, labour-management relations were relatively harmonious and the working environment relaxed. With the onset of full production all this changed, and the meaning of "lean" became clearer. Workers learned how it felt to perform highly standardized jobs with

short—one and one half to three minute—time cycles, day after day. They learned that the LP version of job enlargement — responsibility for in-line inspection, stocking small parts, reporting faulty equipment and housekeeping — required no special training, and that heavy work loads left them little or no time to handle these indirect tasks anyway. Workers discovered that job rotation within teams, which although regularly practiced, was not equivalent to skill development and multiskilling but rather to multitasking—a different phenomenon altogether.

This recognition was paralleled by growing dissatisfaction with CAMI's training effort. Workers found out that their participation in the continuous improvement of operations (*kaizen*) was circumscribed by the goals of cost reduction and work intensification rather than the construction of safer, easier or more interesting jobs. This would have come as no surprise to those workers who had noticed the section in the CAMI training manual that read "*kaizen* must always be tied to concrete cost reductions." The manual shows a group of workers waving good-bye to a co-worker following what was described as a successful team effort at *kaizen*. In time the word *kaizen* came to be used on the shopfloor as a short-hand expression for job elimination.[10]

Staffing levels and workloads were among the most prevalent and contentious issues to arise over the course of the two year study. A manager interviewed during the final visit described staffing as "one of the biggest issues for me since I've been here." Staff levels were determined by a combination of work standards imported from Japan and a computer program of standard times to establish, theoretically, the number of PAs needed to meet production quotas. No allowance was made for unscheduled absences, turnover, maternity leaves, injuries, a more difficult model mix, or other unexpected developments. Because there was no relief crew, team members were expected to cover for their injured or absent co-workers by working harder.

The ramifications of CAMI's policy of operating with a lean, bare-bones workforce became obvious with production in full swing. A team leader summed up the difficulty:

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10 So far job elimination at CAMI has meant not lay-offs or job loss, but reduced team size. From the workers' point of view, then, *kaizen* or job elimination translates into doing the same amount of work with fewer people. For example, when we asked respondents in round four, "Which best describes CAMI's efforts at reducing waste and increasing efficiency," 92 per cent chose "reducing jobs" over "increasing jobs" (8 per cent); 61 per cent chose "working harder" over "working smarter" (39 per cent); and 90 per cent chose "a more demanding workpace" over "a more comfortable workplace" (10 per cent). On occasion, however, workers have used the *kaizen* process to achieve outcomes that are in workers' interests, such as their creation of off-line sub-assembly areas to allow workers periodically to rotate off the more physically demanding main line. For a discussion of CAMI's *kaizen* process and the participatory programs associated with it, see Rinehart, Robertson, Huxley, and Wareham (1994).

> The staffing problems were that they had on the lines exactly what we needed, so if we had a person off or a person hurt or something we were scraping. We were working twice as hard as we should be. We weren't getting the help we needed to run the line.

Another team leader looked back wistfully to a more relaxed period when workers had time to do their jobs and to pitch in voluntarily to deal with housecleaning and other indirect duties.

> When I started here guys would go out of their way to repair something that was broken. Now they say, 'the hell with it,' and I can't blame them. They just don't have the time to do it.

Staff shortages developed to the point where some managers started siding with the union's demands for extra staffing. A union representative said:

> Believe it or not, sometimes the area leaders come to us and say, 'we need more manpower and we've tried everything.' It's like, 'will you do anything for us?'

Another member of the in-plant committee commented:

> We'll talk to the area leaders and we'll talk to the managers and they'll agree with us, but then they have to process the manning requirements through the Japanese management and that seems to be where the stumbling block is. They put it on hold. Their favourite line is, 'Well, we don't do it this way in Japan.' But our line is, 'This isn't Japan.'

Lean staffing was exacerbated by CAMI's penchant for continuous improvement. Roving *kaizen* teams comprised of management personnel pared away staff. Floaters were routinely removed from teams to fill shortages elsewhere in the plant. *Kaizen* dictated the continuous increase in line speed without adding workers. Historically, such speedups in Big Three plants have been vigorously resisted, leading to compromises whereby faster line speed and increased staffing have become inseparable. Things are different at CAMI, as one manager explained:

> We have figured out what the manpower should be, there is no question about that, but then as far as increasing, you may at a point increase the line speed without adding people. And that's sort of foreign, because in GM, like I say, whenever you increase the line they figure you're going to add manpower. The two things go hand in hand [at GM but not at CAMI].

The dictates of LP led to an alarming ("explosive" in the words of one manager) increase in repetitive strain injuries (RSIs), which exacerbated staffing problems and interrupted job rotation schedules, which further intensified RSIs. Overwork was blamed on injured workers, causing dissension within teams. As production intensified, the control apparatus tightened up. An assembly team was told by the area leader that they needed written permission to go to the washroom; a worker was unable to get away from the line to take

his insulin; overtime was scheduled arbitrarily; and there were frequent complaints about inter-team transfers, the strict absenteeism policy and the difficulty of getting an authorized day off. Workers were critical of management's refusal to replace absent workers or those off on RSI, to allow workers to listen to radios and read newspapers, or to wear shorts in the hot summer months. During the final research visit a union representative said: "We're getting guys written up for the most moronic things, like they think we're in high school or something."

Several managers offered candid assessments of the source of shopfloor problems. One manager explained:

> It's easy to get this thing started...it was like a honeymoon for us. We were only building a hundred, hundred and fifty five trucks a day...We were hardly building any cars too, because we were in start-up...It was a lot of fun when you had time. The line would go down at two in the afternoon because you met the day's production. You cleaned, you TPMed [total production maintenance], you worked on problems. And guess what? Now the line runs from seven until three-thirty...there's two hours overtime.

Another manager gave the following explanation for CAMI's failure to realize its professed values:

> I personally think that because of our push for vehicles, our push for quantity, our push for numbers, because of the overtime we've had to work, because of their schedules, that our use of the values has suffered...I'm not saying that it's worse than other plants, and in fact it may be better than other plants, but to me it's a bit of a disappointment.

Team leaders, local union representatives and managers described a growing disparity between the ideals of CAMI and their application, and the consequent disillusionment among the workforce. A team leader observed:

> When I first came here I thought it was going to be the greatest place on earth.... *Nagare* really pumps you up really good, they know how to do that. But once you get out on the floor and start working for a while it's a lot different.

Recognition of the disparity between ideals and reality was not restricted to PAs and team leaders. A manager stated:

> One of the concerns that we had heard — this is already over a year ago — is that what's being taught at the training sessions is not necessarily the same as what's practiced on the floor. So we've tried to tone down some of the segments of the [training] program.

In an early round an area leader felt CAMI was living up to its ideals as much as could be expected in an environment where, after all "production...is the backbone of what we're doing." During our final interview, however, she did admit that CAMI values were being ignored: "As far as...the environment,

I think it's getting more traditional as the days go on. You don't want that to happen."

CAMI's failure to deliver its package of promises had become so apparent that management initiated a "back to the values" campaign. Admitting that CAMI values were not being practiced, one manager said:

> I'm not naive enough to say that every area leader or manager practices the same way, but one of the objectives that we have for this organization for this year [1991] is to again get clearly focused on the values; to not drift from the way we tried to set up the organization...I think it's important to keep working at it, especially as we get more into this routine of building vehicles. It's not the same as what it was when we started out... when there was more time.

A union representative was less enthusiastic about the company's attempt to reaffirm its values:

> They came out with a piece of paper, and that's about it...said they wanted to get back to the basics, you know...just like something right out of *Nagare*. The guys are down there building cars. The last thing they want to hear about is open communication, *kaizen*, empowerment, especially when the management doesn't practice it themselves.

SOURCES OF WORKERS' DISCONTENT

Florida and Kenney (1991) maintain American workers have had little difficulty in adapting to lean production. Where problems have surfaced, as at Mazda's plant in Michigan, they attribute the difficulties not to lean production itself but to its partial or inadequate implementation. They quote several workers to the effect that American managers are too inflexible or threatened by the new, more consultative system to make it work properly.

> American middle managers, especially those recruited from U.S. auto corporations, have experienced great difficulty adapting to Japanese production organization and management (1991:389).

When workers struck CAMI, *Automotive News* (September 21, 1992) cited local union spokespersons who attributed the strike to the actions of traditional tough minded managers brought in from the GM system. The article concluded: "Angry workers at the transplant are blaming GM for their unhappiness, not the Japanese management philosophy GM is trying to follow here."

This explanation of problems inside transplants is misleading. The partial implementation explanation allows lean production enthusiasts to explain away operational or labour relations problems. In effect, it insulates lean production from criticism. As a result, assertions of the superiority of

labour-management relations under lean production can never be empirically disputed.

It is all too easy to attribute shopfloor problems that have arisen at CAMI to the arrival of hard-nosed GM bosses who have circumvented the prescribed management style of LP. In contrast, the research at CAMI suggests it is the system of lean production that produces shopfloor problems and hard-nosed management. In other words, it is not the partial but the complete implementation of a production system single-mindedly devoted to maximum output with minimal labour input that is the source of problems experienced by workers.

LP is a system that strives to operate with minimal labour inputs. It is a system whose objectives are to take time out of labour and labour out of production. It is a system that aspires to the elimination of all production buffers save one — workers who will toil harder and longer whenever required. Thus the ideals taught to new workers in *Nagare* training at CAMI — team spirit, partnership and win-win outcomes — have little chance of survival once this system of LP is in place. At the end of the two year period of study, far fewer CAMI workers would have disagreed with the team leader who said: "People are certain to come to the realization that regardless of how highly they talk of this place or make it sound, that basically it's just another auto plant."

WORKER RESISTANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE UNION

Workers regularly contested the dictates of LP at CAMI. Interest and participation in QC circle and suggestion (*teian*) programs declined. By the end of the two year study, fewer workers did *taiso* (pre-shift calisthenics). Attendance at pre-shift team meetings dropped off. Workers often no longer knew their teams' names or even if their teams ever had names. Grievances increased.[11]

There were instances of work slowdowns, and work refusals became more common. Teams acted in solidarity to obtain relief workers; to resist losing a team member; to regain an off-line sub-assembly position; to demand

[11] Participation in QC circles dropped from 56 per cent in round one to 38 per cent in round four. The corresponding figures for participation in the suggestion program were 82 per cent and 45 per cent. Nearly all respondents (98 per cent) reported having done *taiso* at some time, but by the final found only one per cent said they were still doing it. In round one 85 per cent of respondents said they always attended team meetings; 46 per cent reported doing so in round four. Only four grievances were filed in 1989, but by October, 1991 the grievance load had reached 150. In September, 1992, just before the strike, the number of unresolved grievances had ballooned to over 400.

more frequent job rotation; to protest unsafe working conditions and the company's stringent dress code.

Shackled by a weak first contract but strengthened by the policies and advice of the national CAW, the local union increasingly supported or led these struggles. Even a partial list of union actions gives a sense of the kinds of issues taken up and their outcomes.

The union assured workers that refusals to do pre-shift exercises, to hand in *teians* or to participate in QC circles would not lead to grief or punishment. The local supported a collective campaign to pull the *andon* cords[12] to protest understaffing on the door line that brought two extra workers to the area. The local unsuccessfully pushed for the right to listen to radios and won the right to have reading material other than that distributed by the company in team areas. The local's support of workers' demand to wear poppies on Remembrance Day or shorts in the summer led the company to relax its strict dress code. CAMI would not move on the union's demand to remove workers from disciplinary tribunals, but the company gave some ground on the union's demand to grieve discharges of probationary workers. The local successfully spearheaded a struggle against CAMI's policy of arbitrarily determining cross-training moves between teams in different departments.

There were several actions of the local that merit special consideration. In the start up phase to full production, workers complained of some team leaders who were acting like bosses and who identified with the company rather than the union and the team. In early 1990, 400 workers attended Local 88's meeting to discuss the role of the team leader. By way of response, the local produced a set of guidelines for team leaders. The guidelines stress that the team leader is a unionized production worker who is a "technical advisor, not a personnel manager." The distinction between team leaders and managers is summed up by the statement that the function of the team leader "is to support production," while that of the area leader "is to manage people."

An example of the leadership role of the union was the struggle over health and safety. The collective agreement originally stipulated that the union members of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) would come from the ranks of elected committee persons. Given the busy schedules of committee persons, the union felt this committee could be staffed by rank-and-file members who could devote more time to this important area of work. After much

12 Hanging above each work station are yellow and red *andon* cords, and at regular intervals in the aisles there are overhead *andon* boards. If a yellow cord is pulled, the *andon* board alerts the team leader, and area leaders, which work station is having trouble. The line remains in motion, and annoying electronic tunes continue until the problem is resolved. The red *andon* stops the line.

debate, the company agreed to allow the union to designate two full-time JHSC members from outside the shop committee.

The company was reluctant to recognize the right of workers to refuse unsafe work under Section 23 of the Ontario *Health and Safety Act*. Workers were sometimes threatened with discipline for exercising this right. At other times, managers pressured workers to cut corners in various ways, such as ignoring the locking-out of machines in order to minimize down-time. In response to mounting concerns throughout the plant, the union safety representatives called in the Ministry of Labour. Subsequently, the Ministry issued 28 orders and forced the company to recognize the right of workers to refuse unsafe work. Interestingly, CAMI responded to these events by trying unsuccessfully to rescind its agreement to allow the two extra health and safety reps.

The right to refuse to perform unsafe work became an important weapon for workers, who began to use Section 23 to protest the threat of injury posed by work intensification and inadequate staffing. The June, 1991 issue of Local 88's newsletter, *Off the Line*, contained a half-page picture of a team that collectively invoked their right to refuse unsafe work due to a lack of relief and rotation and a failure to replace workers placed on restricted work because of RSIs. The title of the page on which the photograph appeared was "Changing the Definition of 'Teamwork'". The words under the picture read, "What does teamwork mean to you? To the members of Final 4 YOE Assembly it means *solidarity*."

The action of this team was only one of a number of similar collective protests taken in the plant. In resisting the company's subordination of workers' physical well-being to production and cost reduction, the union fostered the genuine empowerment of workers to use the *Health and Safety Act* as a weapon to defend their rights (and their bodies). Activities like this constituted the building blocks for a strong local union. Local 88's involvement in and direction of workers' struggles not only led to important victories but also promoted the self-confidence, cohesion and collective power of workers. The local gave workers a distinct point of reference, one that stood in sharp contrast with and provided a challenge to the philosophy of the company. Local 88 established itself as a force to be reckoned with by enabling individual workers to channel their discontent into a larger, more effective struggle to protect and promote their rights and interests.[13]

13 Union leaders of Local 88 and Local 3000 of the Mazda plant have established an ongoing relationship to discuss and address their common problems. The first meeting of the two locals from different national unions and different countries was held in January, 1991.

THE STRIKE

With the first contract on the verge of expiration, Local 88 received an almost unanimous (98 per cent) strike mandate from the membership. There was nothing unusual about the issues that prompted the strike. Wages and benefits, which were below Big Three levels were important considerations, as were conditions inside the plant. However, in-plant conditions — RSIs, work loads, team leader selection procedures, lack of relief workers, strict absenteeism policy, arbitrary management decisions — assumed a special significance in light of the package of ideals and values professed but not delivered by the company. At the plant entrance, for example, strikers sported a large banner with CAMI's "old values — open communication, empowerment, *kaizen*, and team spirit" crossed out and replaced by the "new values" of "dignity, respect, fairness and solidarity." Throughout the five week strike around-the-clock pickets were maintained, as was the morale and solidarity of the workers, many of whom walked a picket line for the first time.

The new three year contract narrowed the wage and benefit gap between CAMI and the Big Three. These gains were important in their own right, but also in that they constituted a defeat of CAMI's goal of breaking away from pattern bargaining and tailoring remuneration to the economic performance of the individual enterprise. In-plant gains included a one year experiment with elected team leaders, limitations in job standards and line speeds, beefed-up union involvement in health and safety matters, and the establishment of production support groups to provide pools of relief workers.

IS CAMI THE EXCEPTION?

Commentators often characterise labour-management relations in the auto assembly transplants as remarkably stable, citing the failure of some high profile union organizing drives and the absence of strikes. However, such indications should not be taken as sufficient evidence of markedly superior working conditions or labour-management harmony. Claims for the liberatory environment of lean production so forcefully advanced by Womack, Roos, and Jones (1990) need to be critically reappraised.

The findings on CAMI presented in this paper do not stand alone. A small number of transplant studies undertaken from the vantage point of the shop-floor have challenged the popular notion that working conditions under LP are superior to those that have prevailed in traditional North American assembly plants. According to Berggren (1992:5), the content of work in auto transplants is much the same as it was at the height of the so-called Fordist regime of the post-World War II period. "If anything," he observes, "the rhythm and pace

of work on the assembly line is more inexorable under the Japanese management system than it ever was before." While touring transplants in Canada and the United States, Berggren and his associates were struck by the heavy overtime demands on workers. They concluded that: "From a biological and medical perspective they [transplants] are simply understaffed" (Berggren, Bjorkman, and Hollander 1991:7). Fucini and Fucini (1990:199) reached a similar conclusion in their study of Mazda's assembly plant in Flat Rock, Michigan, where the Japanese company was keeping "a thinly stretched workforce in perpetual motion." Babson (1993) concurs in his study of the reality of lean production at Mazda, which like CAMI was unionized. Strict attendance policies, dress codes and rules of conduct also characterize transplant operations (Babson 1993; Graham 1993; Junkerman 1982, 1987; Kendall 1987). And even the proponents of lean production concede that work under this system is fast-paced and stressful (Adler, 1993a, 1993b; Kenney and Florida, 1993; MacDuffie, 1988). If past experience in North American industrial relations is any indication, these are not the kinds of conditions out of which long term industrial harmony is fashioned.

Transplant stability, as measured by the absence of strikes and a low level of unionization, can be attributed not to the supposed consensus-producing features of lean production but to a number of factors including prevailing economic and political conditions. Workers in many North American plants in recent years, especially in the United States, may have been relatively immune to unionization and shown a reluctance to strike. Relevant are the massive employment losses in the auto industry and in manufacturing in general, declining union density (in the United States) and political influence, and the threat of plant closures and relocations. It is no coincidence that transplants have tended to locate in rural or exurban areas where wages are low, jobs scarce and with no union history. Moreover, transplants wholly owned by the Japanese have actively resisted unionization through outright intimidation of pro-union workers and other blatant forms of anti-unionism (Green and Yanarella 1993; Kenney and Florida 1993; Parker and Slaughter 1988).

Evidence suggests that social relations inside the non-union, transplants are also less than ideal. Graham's (1993) participant-observation study revealed considerable conflict and worker resistance at the non-union, Subaru-Isuzu (SIA) plant in Indiana. There is no way of knowing if SIA is typical of non-union transplants, since other similar operations have not been subjected to independent shopfloor research. Nevertheless, Graham's study does suggest that a non-union environment in an auto assembly transplant cannot be equated with harmonious labour-management relations.

In the United States the unionized transplants' concerted efforts to nurture worker consensus and transform local unions into partners have been

facilitated by the national United Automobile Workers' (UAW) disavowal of adversarial tactics and support for labour-management cooperation. As Berggren (1993:180) observes: "The labor-management collaboration and teamwork at NUMMI was heralded by Solidarity House [UAW headquarters in Detroit] as the future, and an embodiment of central union aspirations." The CAW national office, in contrast, while agreeing to some major modifications of standard work rules and practices as a *quid pro quo* for unionization at CAMI, subsequently went on record as opposing the specifics of lean production (e.g. teams and *kaizen*) if they degraded working conditions and eroded union independence. The CAW recommended cooperation only when workers had something to gain from the process, and the union affirmed its dedication to representing the independent interests of workers (Canadian Auto Workers 1990). The CAW encouraged the CAMI local to forge an identity independent of the company and to defend and promote workers' interests.

Despite the UAW's endorsement of cooperation,labour-management relations at the local level in all United States auto plants, including the transplants, are decidedly uneven (Turner 1991). Little has been written about the Diamond Star plant in Normal, Illinois, although Berggren (1993:181) was told by the local union president that workers attitudes had shifted from trust to distrust of management. At Mazda in Flat Rock, Michigan, working conditions and shopfloor relations have paralleled in many respects those at CAMI. The initial group of appointed, pro-cooperation local union leaders at Mazda were replaced through elections by a more militant slate. There have been recurrent in-plant demonstrations, work stoppages, work-to-rule actions, and boycotts of the suggestion program. In 1991 the membership gave a 94 per cent strike mandate. The strike was averted just before expiry of the deadline (Babson 1993). Substantial gains were achieved, including relief workers, improved training, a more liberal policy on transfers and the right to elect team leaders. These developments suggest that philosophical differences between the CAW and the UAW are important but not necessarily decisive. An hour or two more of deadlocked negotiations and Mazda, not CAMI, would have become the exception.

This leaves NUMMI as the ostensible model of harmony in a unionized transplant. While there has been no systematic investigation of shopfloor relations at NUMMI, labour-management relations on the shopfloor do not appear to reflect the same degree of acrimony as do those at Mazda or CAMI, nor have NUMMI workers come close to a full-fledged strike. While the adherents of LP may attempt to explain this state of affairs by reference to internal conditions, such as union cooperation, management's emphasis on building high-trust relations and worker participation, contingent conditions cannot be discounted. Both advocates and critics of lean production give some explanatory weight to the severe trauma experienced by NUMMI workers, many of whom

were thrown out of work for several years by the closure of the GM plant that is now NUMMI (Adler 1993a; Parker and Slaughter 1988; Turner 1991). It is not unreasonable to assume that these workers are still haunted by the fear of job loss and that this influences their actions. Moreover, the low level of conflict at NUMMI is relative in the sense that workers, particularly those in assembly, have evinced modes of resistance that suggest deep discontent with working conditions and management. These include a petition signed in 1988 by 1,000 workers protesting understaffing and the strict absenteeism policy, and the election in 1991 and 1994 of many candidates of the opposition People's Caucus. Among the issues in these elections were heavy work loads and speed-up, the high rate of RSIs, and management favouritism. It is telling that in 1994 the Administration Caucus campaigned on a platform of fear, warning that a victory for the People's Caucus would result in the closure of the plant. Despite this tactic, the opposition took about one-half of the union positions, including chair of the bargaining committee (Parker 1994).

Proponents of lean production are likely to define CAMI as an aberration by invoking the partial implementation thesis or stressing the militancy of the CAW. In one respect only are they right. The strike does distinguish CAMI as exceptional, at least until there are similar manifestations of industrial conflict in other transplants. However, the conditions that produced the strike appear in unionized as well as non-unionized transplants. In this sense CAMI is not unique.

The role of the national union remains to be addressed. Major philosophical and policy differences between the CAW and UAW are important, but they do not decisively shape local union politics. Certainly, the CAW's rejection of labour-management cooperation and its critique of LP have influenced Local 88 leaders and members. But apart from the strike itself, developments at CAMI are quite similar to those at Mazda. If anything, Mazda workers have manifested greater shopfloor militancy than CAMI workers. Perhaps NUMMI is the most distinctive unionized transplant. While NUMMI may lie at the "harmonious" end of a continuum of unionized transplant labour-management relations, the distance between it and its polar opposites — CAMI and Mazda — is not all that great. At the end of the day, local militancy or quiescence cannot be imposed from the top by union leadership. It is in the complex interaction of external economic conditions, national union policies, shopfloor social relations among workers and between workers and managers, and the character of local union leadership that we must look to understand local union philosophies and actions.

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L'engagement du travailleur, les relations du travail et la production allégée à l'usine CAMI

Les auteurs examinent les efforts de CAMI, une entreprise conjointe de General Motors et de Suzuki qui opère en Ontario, afin de favoriser l'engagement des salariés et le développement de relations patronales-syndicales caractérisées par la coopération. Quelles sont les causes de cet échec ? Pourquoi, de tous les transplants nord-américains, est-ce à CAMI que les rapports de travail ont évolué vers le conflit ouvert ? Quelles sont les implications de la production allégée (*lean production*) pour les salariés et quelles sont les réponses syndicales à ce système de production ?

Les conclusions présentées dans cet article sont le résultat d'une enquête longitudinale réalisée sur une période de deux ans par le Groupe de recherche des Travailleurs canadiens de l'automobile (TCA) sur CAMI. Une attention particulière a été portée aux rapports sociaux de travail et à l'organisation du travail. Les résultats de l'enquête auprès d'un échantillon de salariés tirés au hasard alimentent les conclusions des auteurs.

L'entente collective signée initialement entre CAMI et la section locale 88 des TCA reconnaissait plusieurs des caractéristiques des méthodes japonaises de gestion. La direction de l'entreprise a déployé des efforts considérables pour favoriser le développement d'une force de travail engagée envers la compagnie et ses valeurs. Les résultats de l'enquête montrent l'évolution de l'attitude des salariés à l'égard des politiques, des pratiques et des valeurs de la compagnie sur une période de deux ans, soit entre l'ouverture de l'usine et la grève de 1992. À chaque nouvelle ronde d'entrevues, les répondants ont fait preuve d'un scepticisme croissant envers les valeurs de la compagnie. Le nombre de salariés qui n'ont indiqué aucun engagement symbolique à l'égard de CAMI a presque doublé au cours de la période d'enquête.

Durant la période qui a suivi l'ouverture de l'usine, les relations du travail étaient relativement harmonieuses et l'environnement de travail assez détendu. Cette situation devait changer lorsque la production a atteint son plein régime. L'insatisfaction des salariés a augmenté avec l'intensification du travail, la réduction des temps de cycle, la standardisation du travail et une politique de rotation des tâches qui ne favorisait pas

vraiment la polyvalence des salariés. Les exigences associées à la réduction des coûts de production par l'intensification du travail ont coupé court à la participation des salariés au programme d'amélioration continue (*Kaizen*), surtout que l'organisation du travail ne conduisait pas à des tâches plus stimulantes pour les salariés.

Les chefs d'équipes, les représentants syndicaux et les cadres ont exprimé leur désillusion face à l'écart croissant entre les idéaux véhiculés par CAMI et la réalité quotidienne. L'article rejette la proposition à l'effet que les problèmes vécus à CAMI peuvent être attribuables à l'adoption partielle du système de production allégée ou à une mauvaise stratégie d'implantation de ce système. Au contraire, les auteurs soutiennent que les problèmes de production et le style de gestion observés sont le fruit de ce système de production. Les problèmes éprouvés à CAMI résultent de l'implantation intégrale et non partielle d'un système qui cherche à maximiser la production avec une force de travail réduite au minimum.

En plus des résultats de l'enquête par questionnaire, l'article s'appuie sur l'observation de comportements et d'actions qui expriment un déclin de l'engagement des salariés. La participation aux cercles de qualité, au programme de suggestion et aux rencontres d'équipe a diminué. Le nombre de griefs a augmenté alors que les ralentissements de la cadence de travail et les refus d'affectation devinrent plus courants. De plus en plus, les équipes agissaient de façon solidaire dans leur opposition aux stratégies managériales de réduction de main-d'œuvre et, de façon plus générale, aux politiques de la compagnie.

Le syndicat local, affaibli par une première convention collective qui limitait sa capacité d'intervention mais supporté par les politiques et les conseils du syndicat national des TCA, appuyait et prenait dans bien des cas l'initiative de diverses formes de résistance aux politiques de la direction. Les auteurs examinent ensuite les litiges qui ont débouché sur une grève de cinq semaines en septembre et octobre 1992. Bien sûr, les conditions monétaires moins avantageuses que chez les trois grands producteurs de l'industrie représentaient une considération importante pour les syndiqués, mais ce sont surtout les questions relatives à l'organisation du travail qui ont conduit au déclenchement de la grève. Considérant que les idéaux et les valeurs véhiculés par la compagnie ne ce sont pas traduits dans le réalité, ces questions sont devenues les enjeux primordiaux pour les salariés.

La nouvelle convention collective d'une durée de trois ans témoigne du succès du syndicat à résister aux tentatives de la compagnie de se détacher de la négociation type (*pattern bargaining*) et de lier la rémunération à la performance économique de l'entreprise. L'entente conclue comprend un ensemble de gains importants en ce qui a trait à l'organisation du travail, tels l'élection des chefs d'équipe (à titre expérimental pour une période d'un an), des restrictions quant au normes de production et à la cadence de travail, le renforcement du rôle du syndicat en matière de santé et sécurité au travail ainsi la création d'équipes volantes pour remplacer les travailleurs absents.

Les phénomènes observés dans cette usine ne constituent pas un cas isolé. Même parmi les promoteurs du système japonais de production, certains admettent que les salariés doivent alors composer avec une pression forte et un travail stressant. Les

conditions de travail observées à l'usine CAMI sont sensiblement les mêmes que celles rapportées chez d'autres transplants aux États-Unis, qu'ils soient syndiqués (par exemple l'usine Mazda à Flat Rock au Michigan) ou non syndiqués (telle l'usine SIA Subaru-Isuzu en Indiana).

Aux États-Unis, les efforts concertés des dirigeants des usines transplantées pour amadouer les syndicats locaux et en faire des partenaires avec les employeurs pour la promotion des approches consensuelles auprès de leurs membres ont été facilités par le syndicat des United Auto Workers (UAW) qui rejetait les stratégies de confrontation et appuyait la coopération patronale-syndicale. Adoptant une position différente, l'exécutif national des TCA a fait connaître son opposition à ce nouveau système de production s'il entraînait l'érosion de l'autonomie syndicale et la dégradation des conditions du travail, tout en donnant son aval à d'importantes modifications aux règles de travail usuelles en contrepartie de la syndicalisation des salariés de CAMI. Le syndicat des Travailleurs canadiens de l'automobile a encouragé la section locale de CAMI à se forger une identité distincte de la compagnie et à défendre et promouvoir les intérêts des salariés.

Bien que ces différences idéologiques entre les TCA et le UAW aient un effet important sur l'évolution des relations du travail au sein des transplants, les enquêtes menées jusqu'à présent portent à croire qu'il ne s'agit pas du facteur décisif. Alors que l'usine NUMMI, en Californie, semble représenter le pôle extrême de l'harmonie sur un continuum des relations industrielles dans les transplants, la distance qui sépare celle-ci de son pôle opposé, représenté par CAMI en Ontario et Mazda au Michigan, ne paraît pas aussi grande qu'on le suggère parfois. En ce sens, l'usine CAMI ne représente pas un cas exceptionnel dans les rapports de production au sein des usines transplantées en sol nord-américain.